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Cross in the Cross Hairs

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — In August 1980 Yuri Andropov, then head of the K.G.B., was probably given an unpleasant assignment that would determine whether he had the daring and ruthlessness to be master of the Kremlin.

The situation in Poland had become critical. The workers of Gdansk had demonstrated that the Communist "unions" did not represent them; the puppet Government sought the presence of the Red Army; the heavily Catholic population was being encouraged in its growing resistance by the new Polish Pope; and Solidarity's demands for freedom threatened to spread to workers in the Ukraine.

At that point, somewhere, in some language, a person in high authority said "Kill the Pope."

Little by little, a circumstantial case is being made that the somebody who gave that order was Yuri Andropov. The motive to stave off internal disorder was clear; the responsibility as chief crusher of dissent was his.

The operation was handled in the classic manner of official assassinations. To establish a plausible denial of direct responsibility, a subsidiary was needed: the Bulgarian secret service, which follows K.G.B. orders without question and which had long-established "rat lines" smuggling spies and arms into Italy and Turkey, was the obvious choice.

The standard procedure called for the selection of a gunman associated with the right, not the left, and who had nothing to lose. A Turkish neo-Nazi terrorist named Mehmet Ali Agca was in a Turkish jail for the murder of an editor; his escape was arranged, he was brought to Bulgaria, cleaned up and sent around Europe as a tourist, and dispatched to accomplices in Italy to do his job in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981.

He shot the Pope but did not kill him. In terms of international strategy, however, the assassination attempt was successful. Resistance was chilled in Poland; the Catholic Church was taught that the Pope's person was not inviolate; the shock of the murder attempt paved the way for the crack-down at the end of 1981.

However, the Bulgarians acting for the K.G.B. botched a key part of the job: they did not kill their own gunman nor arrange for his escape from an Italian jail. When it became appar-

ent to Mr. Agca that release was not imminent, he began to sing about foreign connections he had refused to identify at his trial.

The tracking back up the line has begun. Journalists have prodded the Italian and Turkish authorities. In August 1982, Claire Sterling in the Readers Digest first pointed to the assassin's Bulgarian connection and the likelihood of Soviet direction. Since September, Reuven Frank's NBC News has been so far ahead on this story that no other network has been willing to compete: "The Pope is described by those in the Vatican who know him best," reported Marvin Kalb, "as believing that the Russians were behind Agca's attempt to kill him and that they may try again."

The Cross is in the cross hairs; as evidence mounts to support the Pope's belief, the Russians and their Bulgarian agents will stonewall and denounce all charges. One faction of American intelligence is of the opinion that the obvious trail back to the K.G.B. was intentional — that the Russians wanted the world to get the message that Moscow had the power and the will to strike at any opposition anywhere. Others think that such a crumb-dropping operation would more likely be a creation of David Cornwell than of the K.G.B., but agree that the result of the shooting in St. Peter's square has been the intimidation of the Vatican.

Examples: in Latin America, clandestine Vatican financial support of anti-Communist forces is curtailed now that the Banco Ambrosiano, closely affiliated with the Vatican bank, has gone bankrupt; in the U.S., bishops determined to undermine the U.S. nuclear deterrent receive no admonition from the Holy See; in Rome, John Paul II, forgiving as St. Sebastian, receives Yasir Arafat, in whose Beirut camp the assassin was trained; in Poland, Archbishop Jozef Glemp withdraws from and weakens Lech Walesa.

What is behind this pattern of retreat from the Vatican's staunchly anti-Communist, antiterrorist posture of only two years ago? John Paul II's reappearance among his flock is testimony to his personal courage, and obviously he hopes the truth will out, but he has been reminded, as no Pope since Peter, that his church must get along with Caesar.

Here is the chain of circumstance: The gunman who tried to kill the Pope was directed by the Bulgarian secret police; the Bulgarians are in the total control of the K.G.B.; the K.G.B. was headed at the time of the decision to kill the Pope by Yuri Andropov; and Yuri Andropov is the man who now rules the Soviet Union.

John Paul II is burdened with the knowledge that the man who probably gave the order to kill a Pope would not lightly be deterred from killing scores of priests and millions of the faithful.